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# Filming the Inside of His Own Head: Godard's Cerebral Passion

The phrase isn't my own; at least I don't think it is, though I don't know where I might have encountered it. But "filming the inside of his own head" seems to me utterly appropriate as a description of Godard's *Passion*. Godard's point of departure in *Passion* seems to have been images he was carrying around in his head; and he asked himself the question, "Could a film be made starting not from a script or even a 'story' but from *images*?" Significantly, the images Godard had in mind were not 'new' or imagined ones he wished to create (or to 'surprise' and 'capture' from the real world), but rather images which haunted him from the tradition of European oil painting, from Rembrandt, Goya, Delacroix, Ingres and El Greco.

In a sense, these images appear in *Passion* as "found objects," that is, we recognize at certain moments that the filmic images are derived from paintings. Thus, there are two distinct blocs of material in *Passion*: the behind-the-scenes lives of a director, actors and actresses, crew, etc. working on a film-in-progress-within-the-film; and some half-dozen *tableaux vivants* consisting of elaborately constructed movie sets with actors and actresses in period costumes adopting poses which mimic the compositions of famous paintings. These set-pieces constitute the raw material, or scenes-to-be-filmed, of both the film-within-the-film and the film itself.

Thus, images derived from paintings (images deformed slightly, due, no doubt, to their long sojourn in the head of Godard) not only become intrinsic to the film but also could be said to engender it. Or, perhaps we should say that the film becomes intrinsic to *them*, that Godard's *Passion* (as well as his passion) is about "getting into the image," about entering and exploring the space—

above all, the emotional space—of the painterly image.

Years ago, back in 1966–67, when making the film *Made in USA*, Godard had experimented with this sense of getting inside the image. "What I wanted," he said at the time, speaking about both *Made in USA* and his short film *Anticipation*, "was to get *inside* the image . . . just the way certain paintings give one the feeling of being within them, *inside* them, or give the impression that they can never be understood as long as the viewer remains outside."<sup>1</sup>

Where Godard's *Made in USA* is concerned, it was indeed a very painterly film. In writing about it when it first came out, I included *Made in USA*, along with Antonioni's *Red Desert*, Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur* and Bo Widerberg's *Elvira Madigan*, in what I termed the burgeoning genre of "painter's cinema" due to the way so much of the narrative in these films was "told" in color, composition and light.<sup>2</sup> But *Made in USA* also had a fairly strong storyline. It was even based on a novel, a David Goodis thriller of political intrigue and double-agent machinations. What was interesting about *Made in USA*, however, was the way the "text" and the "sub-text" flip-flopped, the way the "story" became inconsequential while the "sub-text"—the Americanization of Europe—asserted itself forcefully in the images.

In *Passion*, however, Godard goes further: there is no "story," or wasn't when he began making the film. But Godard has spoken of the resistance he encountered, from the actors and crew on *Passion*, in trying to create a film that would organize itself around images rather than around a script.

At certain moments in making a film it's very painful, but there is at least a scenario. On this film,

what was difficult was that, as is my habit, I didn't have a scenario, but the actors and crew all know me as Mister-No-Scenario, which boils down to the same thing: they say, "We arrive on the set, we wait, Jean-Luc will eventually tell us what to do." So here, I didn't say anything to them; they just stayed there on the set.

But no sooner do I arrive than they ask: "What are we to do?" "What do you want to do?" This quickly became a kind of provocation.<sup>3</sup>

So difficult, and alien, did it seem, apparently, to attempt to work from the images towards the words (if not of a script at least of improvised dialogue) that Godard eventually came to think of his endeavor as a transgression—a "sin"—against some unwritten law of the cinema, something almost grounded in scripture, like "in the beginning was the Word," or "thou shalt not make graven images."

This is not at all a religious film, but ultimately I think it attains the status of sin. I end up saying to myself, regarding my story of the image, that one never gets to see it as primary, it's always relegated to secondary status. The text, which one sees first . . . as is the case where the unions and the workers are concerned, it's always either the bosses or the unions who speak for the workers, one never sees the workers . . . the text will always come before the image.<sup>4</sup>

In making *Passion*, Godard fought against this so-called "law"; but, in the process, apparently, he ended up fighting with quite a few of the people he wanted to work with him on the film. Even before production started, Godard was turned down, in succes-

sion, by four different directors of photography with whom he wanted to work: Vittorio Storaro, Ricardo Aranovich, Henry Lecar, and Henri Alekan. Finally, he turned to his veteran colleague, Raoul Coutard, whom Godard praises as "not, like the others, a colonel of photography but rather a peasant of photography—a humble and very practical man."<sup>5</sup>

With Coutard as director of photography, Godard was finally able to get the production under way, and, more importantly, to get the kind of stunning visual imagery he wanted for this film about images. However, Godard continued to have difficulties with other members of the production team: two directors of production and a decorator quit on him during the shooting. And Godard seems to have alienated just about everyone by turning the tables on them over the issue of how to proceed without a script or even a rough scenario. To demonstrate the difficulty of his predicament, and, also, he claims, to seek their collective help, Godard, in effect, said to everyone: "Look, you want me to put something in writing; what if I in turn ask you to put in writing what *you* can do, what you *want* to do on this particular film?" Of course, nobody took Godard up on this—a fact which rankles him. "I always thought the cinema was an important means of communication," says Godard, playing the innocent, "but the people who work with this

Michel Piccoli and Hanna Schygulla in Godard's *PASSION*





Jerzy  
Radziwilowicz  
directs  
the film  
within  
Godard's  
*PASSION*

means don't want to use it.”<sup>6</sup>

But how does the finished film of Godard's *Passion* communicate with us? Godard may have started with certain paintings in mind and attempted to build the film from these images. A film, however, unfolds in time; and Godard's *Passion* doesn't begin, chronologically, with those paintings. We are not given at the outset the paintings (or rather their cinematic reconstitutions) as raw material from which we are asked, or allowed, to build something. Instead, we come upon these images, from time to time (and never images that merely duplicate, in the frame of the movie screen, the precise compositions of the paintings, but always “more” or “less” . . . and “other” . . . than the painted images); and they are imbedded, albeit uneasily, loosely, within a narrative, a “story,” or sorts, the very existence of which the images not only predate but also supposedly engender.

The process by which these images from paintings engendered this “story” is suggested, obliquely, by the fact that the “story” of *Passion* is nothing other than the story of the making of a film; and this film-within-the-film is also called *Passion*. So, in a sense, we are retracing the steps of Godard's “*Passion*,” following him on this *via dolorosa*

that is the martyrdom of the film-maker, or at least of this singularly self-martyred film-maker.

What we get, then, are bits and pieces, fragments of images, fragments of sounds, stuck together loosely, roughly, *as if provisionally*, as if, at some later date, these individual pieces might be pulled apart, separated out, to be reutilized in some other combination, in some other context. Moreover, the viewer-listener of Godard's *Passion* often has the impression that the very bits and pieces we are seeing and hearing in this film have themselves been ripped out of other Godard films, to be thrown, pell-mell, perhaps at random, into *Passion*. There is the fascination with cars and car accidents from *Week-end*; the ubiquitous pin-ball games from *Vivre sa Vie*; the Lorca quotation from *Pierrot le fou*; and the frequent eruption of push-and-shove fights from *Sauve qui peut* (most of which have a farcical knockabout quality reminiscent of Claude Brasseur's fight with Ernest Metzger's nephew in *Bande à part*). In *Passion* there is an Italian film producer who evokes both Jack Palance from *Le Mépris* and the boss of the salami factory from *Tout va bien*. There is the strangely disquieting “doubling” effect of the pairing film-video from *Numéro deux*; and from that same film there

is also the obsession with anal intercourse. There is the highly charged emotionalism of the combination of fluid camera movements plus music from *One Plus One*. There are several different variations on the image being out of synch with the sound, recalling Godard's myriad experiments with such effects in his "militant" films. And, above all, there is the previously mentioned attempt, reminiscent of what Godard was doing in *Made in USA*, to explore from the *inside* certain paintings, to get "inside" the image.

The problem with *Passion*, however, is that while the explorations of the individual paintings do indeed have an emotional density, the other scenes generally do not. Nor, surprisingly, do they have an *intellectual* density to compensate for their lack of emotive force. Everything in this film, including the star-studded international cast, seems to be reduced to a paraphrase of its previous existence elsewhere—in paintings, in other films. Jerzy Radziwilowicz plays Jerzy, a Polish director making *Passion*; but Jerzy, the actor, seems completely *dépaysé*, disoriented, zombie-like, perhaps even resentful, or sheepish, or both, that a "man of marble" or a "man of iron" should come to this. Isabelle Huppert plays Isabelle, a young factory worker in a small town in Switzerland where the film being directed by Jerzy is being shot. Isabelle brings class-consciousness to the film; but she brings it in the form of a stutter—which, itself, is a kind of paraphrase. Her political commitment has little concrete form other than its verbal *déformation*—a speech impediment.

Hanna Schygulla lends her presence to Godard's *Passion*, playing Hanna, who is married to the factory owner, who herself owns the motel where the film crew is staying, and who gets involved with Jerzy. She also is persuaded to try her hand at acting in the film being made. But in all these little fragments she just seems to be going through the motions. (Her "screen test," shot in video, consists of attempting to "lip-synch" to a recording of a soprano's aria from Fauré's Requiem.) One can't escape having the feeling that Hanna Schygulla, like Jerzy Radziwilowicz, is *dépaysée*, disoriented, out of her element. He is a Wajda character, and she a Fassbinder character: and they find themselves plopped down in the middle of a Godard film—one with no

script yet—and it just doesn't go anywhere. To round out the big-name cast, Michel Piccoli plays Michel, the factory owner. He, too, is reduced to a paraphrase, a cliché—the suave, slippery capitalist, sweet-talking (Godard has him play his part with a rose between his lips), yet putting the screws to his workers whenever he can get away with it. Where Isabelle the worker stutters (a sign of working class sincerity, says Godard), Michel the owner has a persistent, hacking cough (a sign of capitalist aggressivity and malevolence, says Godard).

These four characters are put through their paces. Jerzy is sullen, brooding, preoccupied, perhaps with the events in Poland. (This is the conjecture of the other characters in the film.) Isabelle, looking very pale and unisex, with her hair cut short, is also sullen, brooding, resentful (of her status as a worker, as a female workers, as a female, as a "perhaps" virgin). Hanna is her usual self, at least in appearance—luscious, over-ripe, like some exotic fruit—and one senses in her that calculating quality, that predator's instinct which Fassbinder so vividly brought out in her; but in Godard's *Passion* she has nothing to sink her teeth into, nor is there anyone strong enough to sink his teeth into her. The minimal plot would have us believe that something is going on between Hanna and Jerzy, but one's own eyes and ears give that the lie. If this indeed is "passion," it is a singularly empty "passion," all in Godard's head.

There is also supposedly something going on between Isabelle and Jerzy. The film doesn't exactly establish this as a grand "passion," either, but at least there seems to be some substance to it. What that substance might be, however, is perplexing. After Isabelle and Jerzy have made love from a frontal position, he proposes to take her "from behind." She assents, saying that she has always dreamed of "an egalitarian sexual relationship . . . one that doesn't leave any traces." The irony is that the act of anal intercourse effectively eliminates from the sexual relationship any trace of sexual *difference* where the woman is concerned. In anal intercourse, she "might as well be a man." Equality, for Isabelle, seems to involve precisely the denial of her femaleness (whence also, it would seem, her tom-boy haircut).

Godard cryptically undercuts this notion of

Isabelle's, however, by having Jerzy's voice-over speak the line, "It cannot pass that way because it is not the right passage"—a line which calls into question not only Isabelle's notion of what might constitute an egalitarian sexual relationship but also whether that particular sexual act was consummated. And, at the level of the filmic discourse, Jerzy's line, which extends beyond the scene with Isabelle to overlap the beginning of the next scene, calls attention to the cinematic passage—always arbitrary, always in some sense the "wrong passage"—from one scene to another.

"There are no rules in the cinema," a voice-over insistently repeats near the beginning of *Passion*. And Jerzy keeps saying, "I'm discovering that you have to live stories before inventing them." Moreover, a voice-over tells us that the film we are watching is "not a lie, but something imagined, separated from the real world by profoundly calculated approximations of verisimilitude." All of this is fine, if a bit wordy, especially from a film whose point of departure is supposed to be images rather than words.

Suddenly, however, we are thrown into the composition of Rembrandt's "Nightwatch." Large areas of the composition are in darkness, obscuring the visages of the members of a military company ostensibly keeping watch by night. Here and there, however, unseen sources of light illuminate, as if by spotlight, individual members of the company. At Godard's direction, Raoul Coutard varies the lighting set-up on this *tableau vivant* of actors and actresses representing the "Nightwatch." Different areas of the composition, different individual members of the company, are spotlighted in turn. A voice-over enjoins us, "Don't scrutinize the structure of the shots, do like Rembrandt, look closely at the human beings for a long time, at the lips and into the eyes."

It is a strange enjoiner, coming from Godard. Concentrating on the actors and actresses, allowing ourselves to be caught up in the discursive narrative logic of their gaze, of their facial expressions, ignoring the way the shots are constructed—what is all this but allowing ourselves to fall under the sway of the *representation* at the expense of the *presentation*? Isn't this precisely what Godard has always inveighed against? Perhaps, then, this enjoin-

der is meant ironically. Another voice-over, ostensibly that of Raoul Coutard, offers the suggestion that "this film might be thought of as a 'Daywatch,' with the sun low on the horizon." In other words, *Passion*, unlike Rembrandt's "Nightwatch," will offer a precise source of illumination.

Visually, this might be true. Metaphorically—and Godard says that *Passion* could have as subtitle: "The World and Its Metaphor" or "The Social Element and Its Metaphor"—it is questionable how much "illumination" the film offers, and about what? In *Passion*, Godard pays lip service to his old concern with class struggle; but here it is rendered in more of a comic-book caricature than ever. Isabelle and the factory owner perform a crazy chase scene, comically pursuing each other around the machinery of the shop floor. And later the owner uses his car as a threatening but carefully controlled battering ram to break the picket line of four or five women protesting the firing of Isabelle. But what the issues are isn't clear. So much for the vivid confrontation of opposing classes.

In any case, where metaphorical illumination is concerned, let us look to the paintings Godard has chosen to reconstruct: perhaps we shall find it in them, or, at least, find an understanding of how they functioned, in Godard's mind, as a source of inspiration. After Rembrandt's "Nightwatch," the next classic painting to figure importantly is Goya's famous "The Third of May," depicting the execution by firing squad of a Spanish peasant by Napoleon's troops. It is, perhaps even more than Picasso's "Guernica," the ultimate "political" painting. It is also, ironically, the ultimate *anecdotal* painting. Death, after all, is quite literally the ultimate anecdote. And the violent taking of a life is the most melodramatic of anecdotal subjects.

Earlier, in *Passion*, Godard has repeatedly reiterated his by now familiar resistance to the tyranny of "stories" in the cinema. (In one brief scene, he has even likened that tyranny of "stories" to the tyranny of a man forcing a woman to submit to anal intercourse, while he shouts, "We need stories.") Yet, here, ironically, in this most "political" work of art that is Goya's "The Third of May," Godard turns the tables on us, the audience. And Godard turns the tables on us, signifi-

Rembrandt's  
"Night  
Watch" as  
recreated  
in Godard's  
*PASSION*



cantly, by turning the angle of vision 90° to the left, so that, instead of looking from a side-view at the men of the firing squad, we view them face-on. This puts *us* in the place of the victim. And Godard has Coutard's camera track, in close-up range, along the phalanx of executioners, their rifle-muzzles (with bayonets attached) filling up the movie screen, almost seeming to jut out menacingly at us, beyond the screen. Meanwhile, a voice-over states emphatically, accusingly, "You do nothing to change yourselves!"

This accusation, like the rifles in the tracking shot, seems aimed directly at us. Perhaps it is Godard's way of saying that even when we look to art for a political stand, even for a "progressive" political stand, we seem to want that same old power relationship in which we submit to the tyranny of the "story," or to the tyranny of the anecdote in painting.

Indeed, the other classic paintings which figure in *Passion* are also strongly anecdotal in subject. There is Delacroix's "The Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople," an anecdotal subject if ever there was one—and one which Godard explores by animating the *tableau vivant*, exploring it in time as well as in space. Amidst a studio maquette of Constantinople Godard sets four crusaders on horseback in motion. Sporting chain mail and breast armor, they ride through the scale

model streets of Constantinople—the horses' hooves resounding on the wooden planking of the studio set. It is a highly charged moment; one of the most highly charged moments in *Passion*; and it culminates with a nude woman being snatched up and carried off by one of the crusaders on horseback. "To the victors go the spoils," might be the caption to Godard's reading of Delacroix's composition.

Here is European Romanticism at its most violent, most paroxysmal delusion of grandeur, with all its fascination for the lure of the exotic, with its "Orientalism," in which the fabled Near East functions as the exotic, erotic "Other," which Europe takes by force, by force of imperialism, although rationalizing it as in the service of that great spiritual idea known as Christianity (which Europe also took from the Near East and brought back there with a vengeance). There is indeed a certain "passion" being acted out here, being visualized here: it is the "passion" of western civilization's "ways of seeing," of European capitalism's political economy of "the look" as an instrument of appropriation.

In patriarchal society, the basic appropriation is that of women by men. By the nineteenth century, after several centuries of colonialism and imperialism, patriarchal western European society found a hypocritical (or highly sublimated) way of holding the nude



Delacroix's  
"Entry of  
the Crusaders  
into  
Constantinople,"  
as recreated  
in Godard's  
*PASSION*

female body as the object of the masculine gaze, and, at the same time, of effectively masking its own implication in this power structure by *displacement* of the scene, which was "projected" onto another culture, that of the Near East, where an even more flagrant manifestation of patriarchy allegedly held sway. This Orientalism, which has been examined in literature, in the history of ideas, and in politics by Edward Said (see his book *Orientalism*, Vintage, 1979), is here examined, briefly, but with "passion," as it figures in painting—and, by extension, in the cinema—by Godard.

Moreover, Godard, at the same time as he looks at this phenomenon, clearly implicates himself in the act of looking. Of course, Orientalism, *per se*, has not really been an issue in Godard's films; but the appropriation of the nude female body by the masculine gaze certainly has. Woman, in a very real sense, has been Godard's "Orient," his ever mysterious, ever exotic, erotic "Other." Even when he has presented an implicit critique of the ways conventional ("bourgeois") movies exploit the nude female body, Godard has consistently signaled his own implication in the fascination with the very exploitation he is "uncovering." In fact, there is even a superior order of power inherent in a critical enterprise such as Godard's, since his critical stance makes it possible for him (and us, too, if we like) to have our

cake and eat it too, to expose the shabby ploys of others while we too enjoy the exposed body of the female, who, even as an object-lesson in demystification, remains an object.

This same conundrum haunts Godard's *Passion*. While he seeks to locate—and examine—its source in nineteenth-century European paintings (not only in Delacroix but also in Ingres, whose "Turkish Bath" we shall get into in a moment), he also liberally sprinkles nude women throughout the fictional "story" sequences in *Passion*. Although women often appear nude in these scenes, men never do. (Even in the scene referred to earlier where a man and woman—not Jerzy with Isabelle, but an anonymous man and an anonymous woman, ostensibly members of the production team of Jerzy's film—engage in anal intercourse, the woman is nude while the man remains fully clothed.) Further, in some cases, the *tableaux vivants* from the paintings become, themselves, the site of fictional scenes where Jerzy and other fully clothed men interact (always in a power position) with the nude women who have been hired as "extras." (An eminently hierarchical and sexist domain, the cinema.)

Of course, the figuration of this interplay (which is always, inevitably, a power play) between clothed men and nude women recalls, above all, a particular painting, which, although not one of the *tableaux vivants* of





Hanna Schygulla and Jerzy Radziwilowicz: *PASSION*

Godard's *Passion*, nonetheless remains the paradigm case—Edouard Manet's "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe." In this painting, Manet did not even resort to Orientalism, to the projection of the scene into another culture. On the contrary, the force of this particular painting lies in the fact that Manet brought the subject home, so to speak, to the easily recognizable Parisian milieu of Sunday outings in the fashionable Bois de Boulogne. Godard, too, brings the subject home, that is, to *his* home, the cinema—to the studio set where a film is being made.

In this respect, Godard makes a connection between the Orientalism of certain paintings (such as the Delacroix, and, particularly, the Ingres) and the cinema's own fascination with the exotic. This comes out most strongly in Godard's treatment of the *tableau vivant* of Ingres's "Turkish Bath." It is, of course, a typical harem scene. Nude women of different races (prizes of the sultan's military conquests in distant lands) languish by a tiled pool, at the disposition of their lord and master. This is the world of the painting; but Godard animates it and explores it in terms of the cinema.

In the equally patriarchal world of the cinema, the role of the sultan, the man who controls these women, who gives them orders, who "lays down the law"—and who controls the access of others to these women (at least in terms of "the look")—is taken by the director of the film. He, in turn, may delegate to a trusted confidant (such as his director of production, here played by Laszlo Szabo) some of his authority. These men, thus, exercise their power over these women in several ways. One way, well known in the cinema, is to keep

these women waiting . . . to keep them nude and waiting . . . to keep them waiting in the nude . . . until the lord and master (the director) is good and ready for them. Another way, while waiting for the "real" event (the actual shooting), is for the men to circulate among them from time to time, fully clothed, scrutinizing them, scrutinizing their nudity, ordering them to change position slightly, to hold their body differently, putting them through their paces.

Jerzy, as director of the film-within-the-film, brusquely orders one nude young woman to get into the pool and "make an angel." The woman does not respond, and shows no sign of even having heard the order. Another woman intervenes, explaining that the young woman is deaf and dumb, that she indeed did not hear the order. The second woman then acts out for the deaf-mute what she is supposed to do. The young woman then slips into the pool, and, with her head toward the camera, floats on the surface of the water and "makes an angel," opening wide her legs. Jerzy, crouching at water's edge on the other side of the pool, stares somberly. "At what?" asks the director of production. "At the universal wound," replies Jerzy.

The camera, however, does not show us what he looks at: we look only at him looking. What the nude female presents openly cannot be represented openly, for what the female nude represents, in patriarchal society's political economy of "the look," is always the image of the male's obsession with looking at her, with his obsession with what is "there" and what is "not there," between her legs, with his uneasiness confronted with sexual difference.

Finally, in keeping with this obsessional schema, the climactic tableau of Godard's *Passion*, El Greco's "Assumption of the Virgin" (to specify, since he painted several, the one in the Museum of San Vicente in Toledo), is intercut by Godard with the conversational scene leading up to Jerzy's aforementioned defloration of the "perhaps" virgin Isabelle, whom he takes both "fore" and "aft." Here, the film's two distinct blocks of material, the "story" and the images from classic paintings, have their greatest overlap. Indeed, to the strains of the "Agnus Dei" from Mozart's Requiem, they seem to come together, meta-

phorically. Moreover, the movie camera's ability to penetrate the space of the painted picture here becomes a metaphor for the male's penetration of the virgin woman's body. The camera thus becomes the sexual instrument which makes possible the entry into and movement through the impossible/imaginary space, "the fantastic voyage" through the body of a woman.

In short, if *Passion* as a whole represents Godard filming the inside of his own head, this segment of *Passion*, the climactic one, represents Godard filming the inside of the body of a woman, indeed, the inside of the body of the Virgin Mother. It is, then, a return to the source, a complete circle—like the circle one woman makes with her body, in yoga-fashion, when she comes to take Jerzy's order for room service at the motel. After such a climax, there remains only the tying up of loose ends of the "story," which is also circular, since, as we are told in voice-over, "it was already over when it began."

Jerzy, too, must return to the source—in his case, to Poland. In his last act as director of *Passion*, Jerzy exasperatedly walks off the set of the *tableau* of "The Assumption of the Virgin," encountering various costumed extras who want to speak to him about one or another detail of their role or of their conditions of employment. As he agitatedly brushes them off, one by one, Jerzy is last seen—appropriately enough, for this Godard-surrogate—wrestling with his angel, the huge-winged "bird-man" angel from El Greco's "Assumption," who momentarily blocks Jerzy-Godard's exit from film-making, from the studio set that is the site of production . . . of cinema.

## NOTES

1. Jean-Luc Godard, (interview) *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 194, October 1967, pp. 13-26, 66-70; also translated into English (by D. C. D.) and published in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, Winter 1968-69, pp. 20-35.
2. James Roy MacBean, "Politics, Painting and The Language of Signs," *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1969; and, MacBean, *Film and Revolution*, Indiana University Press, 1975, pp. 28-44.
3. Jean-Luc Godard, (interview) *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 336, May 1982, pp. 8-15, 57-66.
4. Ibid.
5. Quoted by Calvin Ahlgren, in "Godard's Sumptuous Work of Love," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Datebook, February 26, 1984, pp. 28-29.
6. Op. cit.

# Reviews

## VARIETY

Producer: Renee Shafransky. Director: Bette Gordon. Script: Kathy Acker from an original story by Bette Gordon. Directors of Photography: Tom DiCillo and John Foster. Editing: Ila Von Hasperg. Music: John Lurie. A co-production of ZDF, West German Television, Channel Four Television, England, Arnold Abelson and New York State Council on the Arts.

An opening montage: a fine-boned woman's face in profile, a longer shot of the woman poised, then diving into a blue bottomed pool, a fragmenting close-up of water-wet thighs and the bright red and white stripes of a bathing suit covering slim hips. Even before *Variety*'s credits roll, Bette Gordon maps out the course of her film—descent and immersion into the realm of eroticism and desire. Slipping into the elusive, difficult-to-define territories of fantasy, sexuality and power, *Variety* embraces deviation as a path to self-knowledge, the forbidden as an antidote to impotence. But Gordon is quick to recognize complexity and to question the price of such guilty pleasures. While exploring the consequences of surrender through the persona of her alter ego, *Variety*'s heroine Christine, she also acknowledges the precariousness of her own position. As director of *Variety*, Gordon takes the tremendous risk not only of exposing her own sexual fantasies to countless viewers, but also of expressing uncertainty over a furiously debated, extraordinarily divisive issue—that of women and pornography.

*Variety* is Bette Gordon's second feature. *Empty Suitcases*, her first (1980), was a fashionably oblique, angry narrative about women, terrorism and storytelling set predominantly in New York City. Clearly departing from the stripped-down formalism of that earlier film, *Variety* shines with the polished production values of its \$80,000 budget, raised from ZDF West German Television, Great Britain's Channel 4, and New York State Council on the Arts. Yet for all its gloss, it is a film ruled by darkness, both in its *film noir* stylistics and preponderance of nighttime scenes, and in its script, based on a story by Gordon and written by Kathy Acker, an author whose fiction is distinguished by a darkly perverse sexual vision.

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### [Footnotes]

<sup>2</sup> **Politics, Painting, and the Language of Signs in Godard's Made in USA**

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